

the desperate stroke of a small band of corsairs in search of provisions and plunder, whom persecution or the love of booty had driven to the sea, and to whom Elizabeth, at Alva's instigation, had denied the shelter of English seaports. But the accident brought into play a mighty force in this great drama, and contributed to rally the maritime provinces in unbending devotion behind their refugee stadholder. The narrow strip of meadow land and swamp, that stretches from the mouth of the Scheldt to the Zuyder See, was henceforth the scene of a struggle in which the most ferocious and the most exalted passions contributed to modern history some of its most thrilling as well as its most tragic chapters.

Alva avenged the ill-fated expedition of 1572 by the atrocities of Mons, Mechlin, Zutphen, and Naarden. Torture, massacre, plunder, confiscation, and bestial outrage marked his progress towards the fen land where the great rebel was bracing every nerve for a last stand. Behind him was a bloodstained waste, before him but a few towns in a flat land which seemed to offer no serious obstacle to the advance of his terrible legions, 30,000 strong. And yet that flat strip of land, which only the exertions of centuries had won from the sea, and only the energy of its stout inhabitants had preserved from submersion, was destined to be the grave of Philip's policy and power. Haarlem, indeed, surrendered after defying starvation, pestilence, and the repeated attacks of the finest army of the age for several months of superhuman endurance throughout the winter and early summer of 1573. Its women as well as its men fought and suffered with the most splendid heroism, in the hope of relief which never came. Every effort to this end by water and land was vain, but its reduction on the 12th July 1573 cost Don Frederick, Alva's son and lieutenant, 12,000 men, and he was forced to retire with further diminished numbers from Alkmaar (8th October), before the indomitable resolution that cut the dykes and brought the water of the North Sea into his camp.^a There never was such a war as this," wrote the baffled Alva disconsolately to his master at Madrid.

It was indeed a war of surprises to generals who had not reckoned with the power of patriotism in alliance with the sea, and who were forced to learn their art over again from an insignificant people of fishermen, peasants, and merchants.